

State help for I-40 overdue

By Rep. Ernest Istook Istook, R-Warr Acres, is a member of the House Appropriations Committee and a former subcommittee chairman.

Along the Oklahoma River, boating activities are re-emerging, joggers enjoy new trails and thousands of new trees are taking root, while wildlife settles into restored habitats. It's because \$15 million in federal money supplemented MAPS' river efforts.

Ground will be broken soon for the \$100 million American Indian Cultural Center, a project under way after decades of wishful thinking. It's a reality because we created a federal-state-local/private partnership to divide the responsibility and expense.

The nearby Land Run Memorial reflects a similar partnership. So does the megamillion-dollar growth in our medical research community — bringing Oklahoma its best-paying jobs while improving health care for us and for the world.

The Oklahoma City National Memorial recently gained solid financial footing via a permanent endowment, thanks to another federal-private partnership.

Oklahoma City's advancement is being fueled by more than a billion dollars in partnerships among the federal, state, local and private sectors. But there's one major gap. The largest transportation project in state history has no such partnership.

Interstate 40's Crosstown Expressway must be relocated off its crumbling stretch of elevated highway and onto a safer and wider 10-lane routing. Then a broad new downtown boulevard will be created where I-40 is now. The cost is \$360 million — \$315 million for I-40 and \$45 million for the boulevard.

Typically, the federal share would be about two-thirds of the interstate cost, but none of the boulevard expense. Our efforts as your congressional delegation have secured \$310 million in federal funding — an extraordinary proportion. Oklahoma has even received tens of millions of extra transportation dollars from the federal government during the past two years.

Unfortunately, the state's participation has been equally extraordinary — extraordinarily low.

Not one penny of state funds has even been promised, much less provided. The project isn't even on the multiyear planning list of the state highway commission. Even the city of Oklahoma City has outdone the state, recently committing \$4.5 million for utility re-location.

The problem is lack of commitment, not money.

Efforts to get Gov. Brad Henry and his administration involved have been met with a wait-and-see attitude. Their goal seems to be avoiding a commitment unless forced (or embarrassed) into it.

Normally, a costsharing plan is developed at the start of a project, but that never happened on the I-40 project. The Henry administration has refused to formulate such an arrangement, offering excuses for delaying the project, driving up costs in the process.

Other states find a way to help on major projects. In North Carolina, a \$331 million project on Interstate 40 was provided \$66.2 million in non-federal money, plus another \$187 million in non-federal dollars for other interstate projects.

Partnerships bring progress. The congressional delegation has shown outstanding commitment on our I-40 Crosstown, but the state's refusal to come to the bargaining table has hurt the project.

The passage of a new highway bill in Washington has removed the most recent excuse for inaction, so let's hope the governor, Legislature and highway commission will finally get involved and help fund this important project. It's too late for the governor to lead on this, but it's not too late for him to follow.



Not one penny of state funds has even been promised, much less provided. The project isn't even on the multiyear planning list of the state highway commission. Rep. Ernest Istook, on I-44 Crosstown Expressway relocation project